Coningsby Dawson on England's View of Us

By M. K. WISEHART.

WHY are American novels and the personalities of American novelists not better known to the English literary public and the English novelists?

Americans have been too willing to accept the explanation that American novelists have been unread in England because the Englishmen have better stuff, better style, better technique. But here, if not quite a home Englishman, is a Canadian, Coningsby Dawson, who, with experience in the London literary world and in the publishing business in America, gives a totally different explanation.

Mr. Dawson, now lecturing in America on world reconstruction and giving readings from his war time writings, says that the London literary world cannot be interested in the works of a contemporary author, except under unusual circumstances, until it has become interested in his personality. Though the old Grub street has passed, Mr. Dawson says the ways of Grub street still remain. Owing to a variety of factors, the English literary world is interested first and foremost in the "man who is on the spot."

II.

Ibanez, the author of *The Four Horsemen*, had been published in England years before he was published in the United States, but recognition did not come to the Spaniard in England until after his success in America. Previously his books had had no sale; now they are picking up. The demand the British public is making for Ibanez is introducing him to English literary men. For the fact that early and adequate recognition did not come to the Spaniard is an explanation offered by Mr. Dawson, who says that the London literary world is a sort of "social trades union."

He predicts that American fiction of a certain type is now about to come into its own in England. The American military invasion of England introduced the English booksellers to the novelists that American soldiers wanted to read. Some of these novelists are continuing in demand. Mr. Dawson thinks that Dreiser, Hergesheimer and Tarkington are getting wider appreciation and recognition in London. He says that Hergesheimer's *Three Black Pennies* got a bigger literary appreciation in England than it did in the United States.

"There is an obvious reason why the American novelists are not better known to the British novelists. The London literary world is not keenly interested in the works of a contemporary man unless his personality is familiar. If it is true in America that a man doesn't arrive until he has an acquaintance in literary circles, it is still more the case in London. American writers can become known by living in London. The London literary world is a whispering gallery. A man no sooner lands at Paddington with a manuscript than he becomes known to the London literary world if his manuscript is any good.

"You will almost always find it to be the case in London that a man who comes across and strikes success has put in three or four years at spade and shovel social work before his success came. To arrive in London it seems that you must be on the spot to set off the minds of those who are to make you known to the reading public.

"This is the lamentable fact. I am not defending it. The old Grub street has vanished, but the methods of Grub street still obtain. The literary man finds himself either a member of a sort of social trades union or not a member. If he is not a member, then he is an outlaw.

III.

"It is true of writers of other countries as well as of America that to become known in London they have to be on the spot. If they do not live in London, then some exceptional event is required to make them known, as in the case of Ibanez. I was talking recently with Mr. Meredith, the son of George Meredith, and the head partner of Constable & Co. He told me that Constable had been publishing Ibanez for years and that the books had never got a move on at all until *The Four Horsemen* had become widely known in America. Since Ibanez's American success the British

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public has begun asking for his works and he has of course begun to attract the attention of British literary men.

"It is true, on the other hand, that some British authors themselves do not make their first success in London. Arnold Bennett's success was made first in America. He had been writing books for ten years in London and had never been heard of. *The Old Wives' Tale* landed here and went across the tape. Bennett was then pushed in America and finally they began to ask in London who he was. The answer was, of course, 'He's a chap that lives right around the corner.'

IV.

"If I were asked the reason why British authors 'go' in America, while American authors don't 'go' to the same extent in England, I'd say that America is intellectually a continent while England is a country. In America you are in daily contact with men who are American citizens but whose racial interests embrace all Europe and whose mental curiosity embraces the world. Americans have a wider interest and a different outlook on life which comes from associating with a greater variety of racial prejudices and interests. In Britain, however, there is a definite race point of view which any foreigner has to adopt when he comes. I'd say that Ibanez, for instance, didn't arrive in Britain until after his American success because he is dealing with types foreign to the large majority of English readers. These types had a wide appeal to the average American reader because he has lived in a cosmopolitan crowd.

"Another reason why American authors are not better known in London is one that affects British authors as well. The great strength and weakness of any old country is that she has very deep rooted prejudices and affections. An old country has such a big gallery of national personalities that have long been acknowledged as great that she is very reluctant to admit any living person as their equal—to hang the names of the living on the walls of fame.

"The result of this prejudice is seen in the case of George Meredith, who wrote till he was 70 before his own country knew he was writing at all. He didn't go through the social mill. Every man who does go through it and bows to the altars of Baal unquestionably loses something of himself and in some way warps his message.

"Edward FitzGerald is a still more glaring example of this neglect. He also was an 'outlaw.' He wouldn't bow to anybody. He'd rather associate with a drunken sailor than with Carlyle. He said he could get more out of the sailor's mind than he could out of Carlyle. When he wrote his *Omar Khayyam* he was the intimate friend of Tennyson, Carlyle, John Stuart Mill and all the forefront literary men of the day.

"Not one of them recognized the greatness of the poem, and in their correspondence we find them speaking of FitzGerald and his poem with a sort of amiable, friendly contempt. If FitzGerald had lived in America and had written that poem he might not have become famous overnight, but the American anxiety to proclaim greatness in the living, instead of in the dead, would have given him the courage a literary man needs if he is to follow one great work with another.

"The British are brought up with intense local affections. But the war has set men voyaging. Men who once found satisfaction in this intense local affection will want a bigger surge of experience in the literature they read, and I think we'll see the American book coming into its own in the British market. Not books of social problems, because American social problems are too similar to those of England, but rather books of nation building and nature, desert stories and especially those stories in which one man finds himself pitted against the forces of nature; these, I think, will make a wider and wider appeal to the British reading public.

V.

"At present American books are making an appeal not to the British literary public but to the general public. You cannot say that American authors are unknown in England. Many of them are known to the general public. The American military invasion of England introduced to the British booksellers the authors that American soldiers wanted to read. Among these authors were Booth Tarkington, Zona Gale and Kathleen Norris. Jack London, of course, had been pretty well known in England, but during the war he was brought out in cheap editions, and these were widely circulated. The demand for these writers has kept them on sale, and I believe the tendency of American writers and the experiences they describe will make them more and more in demand in England.

"What was the most prevalent motive among English writers before the war? That motive was the fear of life and the picturesqueness of personal failures. Then they were writing in an overcrowded world where men had no particular chance. Heroic types were not within their knowledge. They wrote of the types they did know, and these were failures. But the American public never did want to read about failures, and in both America and England the type that will count most in the next ten or fifteen years will be the man or woman who is morally and physically brave.

"I do not deny that on the lower levels of fiction the man who writes with the idea of a tawdry sex appeal is still in the saddle, but that man will have to buck up. Five years from now there will be a new set of writers. They will be the men who were at the front; there will be a new cleanness and a new spirit in literature.

"Of this I am sure, that there is no prejudice in England to-day against the American writer. It must be remembered, however, that the American writer has to educate the British public into a knowledge of the environment of the people of whom he writes."